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MOLDOVA IN QUEST OF A *LINGUA COMUNA*: TO THE PROBLEM STATEMENT*

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Rezumat

Moldova în căutarea unei *lingua comuna*: spre o enunțare a problemei

Acest articol prezintă rezultatele preliminare ale primei etape a proiectului de cercetare „Populația rusolingvă a Republicii Moldova și limba română”. Prin „populație rusolingvă” înțelegem minoritățile etnice ale țării, în primul rând rușii, ucrainenii, bulgarii și găgăuzii. Prima etapă a acestui proiect se concentrează pe ucrainenii din Bulăiești (satul Bulăiești este situat în raionul Orhei; de aproape douăzeci de ani se fac studii de amploare asupra ucrainenilor din Bulăiești, ale căror rezultate au fost rezumate într-o monografie publicată anul trecut). În prezent, în satul Bulăiești, persoanele sub 40 de ani și mai ales sub 30 de ani, pot, de obicei, să comunice în limba română, fie, în cel mai rău caz, să înțeleagă limba română vorbită. Adică sunt, într-o oarecare măsură, trilingve. În ciuda sporirii remarcate a cunoștințelor limbii române în rândul ucrainenilor din Bulăiești, în general, implicarea lor în cultura română aproape că nu s-a mărit. Aproape nimeni din sat nu privește filme sau emisiuni TV în limba română, și nu citește cărți sau mass-media. Măsura în care Bulăieștiul reflectă situația întregii populații de limbă rusă și română din Republica Moldova, comunicând formal destul de strâns, diverg tot mai mult în „lumi paralele” la un nivel mai profund. Acest lucru este agravat de faptul că un număr tot mai mare de tineri vorbitori de limbă română cunoaște rău limba rusă sau nu o cunoaște deloc.

Cuvinte-cheie: minorități etnice, limba română, ucraineni, găgăuză, Republica Moldova.

Резюме

Молдова в поисках *lingua comuna*: к постановке проблемы

В статье излагаются результаты первого этапа исследовательского проекта «Русскоязычное население Республики Молдова и румынский язык». Под «русскоязычным населением» мы подразумеваем этнические меньшинства страны, в первую очередь: русских, украинцев, болгар, гагаузов. Первый этап исследования концентрируется на булаештских украинцах (село Булаешты (рум. Bulăiești) расположено в Орхейском районе; масштабные исследования булаештских украинцев ведутся уже почти двадцать лет, их результаты были обобщены в вышедшей в прошлом году монографии). В настоящее время в селе Булаешты люди в возрасте до 40 лет, как правило, могут либо общаться на румынском языке, либо, в худшем случае, понимать румынскую речь, то есть они в той или иной мере трилингвально. Тем не ме-

нее, несмотря на отмеченный рост знания румынского языка среди украинцев Булаешты, в целом, однако, их вовлеченность в румынскую культуру почти не увеличилась. Практически никто в селе не смотрит фильмы или телепередачи на румынском языке, не читает книги или публикации в СМИ. Выяснение того, в какой степени Булаешты отражают русскоязычное население страны в целом, требует отдельного исследования. Но если это точно отражает основную тенденцию, то получается, что представители русскоязычного и румыноязычного населения Республики Молдова, формально общающиеся довольно тесно, на более глубоком уровне все явственнее расходятся в «параллельные миры». Это усугубляется тем, что все большее число румыноязычной молодежи плохо владеет русским языком или совсем не знает его.

Ключевые слова: этнические меньшинства, румынский язык, украинцы, гагаузы, Республика Молдова.

Summary

Moldova in quest of a *lingua comuna*: to the problem statement

The article presents the preliminary results of the first stage of the research project “Russian-speaking population of the Republic of Moldova and the Romanian language”. By “Russian-speaking” population we mean the ethnic minorities of the country, primarily: Russians, Ukrainians, Bulgarians, Gagauz. The first step of the project concentrates on the Bulaestian Ukrainians (the village of Bulaesti (Romanian: Bulăiești) is located in the Orhei district; large-scale studies of the Bulaestian Ukrainians have been conducted for almost twenty years, the results of which were summarized in a monograph published last year). Nowadays in Bulaesti village people under 40 years old, and especially under 30, can usually either communicate in Romanian or, at worst, understand Romanian speech. That is, they are trilingual to some extent. Despite the noted increase in knowledge of the Romanian language among the Ukrainians of Bulaesti, in general, however, their involvement in Romanian culture has hardly increased. No one in the village watches films or TV in Romanian, or reads books or media. To what extent Bulaesti reflects the Russian-speaking population of the country as a whole requires a special study. But if it accurately reflects the main trend, it turns out that the Russian-speaking and Romanian-speaking populations of the Republic of Moldova, formally communicating quite closely, are increasingly diverging into “parallel worlds” at a deeper level. This is aggravated by the fact that an increasing number of Romanian-speaking youth have little or no knowledge of Russian.

Key words: ethnic minorities, Romanian language, Ukrainians, Gagauz, Republic of Moldova.

The purpose of this article is to offer the first steps towards a very interesting and socially important topic. Actually, the author is only trying to give a statement of the problem.

The article in general presents the preliminary results of the first (and, partially, of the second one) stage of the research project “Russian-speaking population of the Republic of Moldova and the Romanian language”. Based on the results of the project, a series of articles with the general title “Moldovan society in search of a *lingua comuna*” is planned.

The object of this first stage of the research is the Bulaestian Ukrainians (and of the second one is the Russian-speaking population of the Gagauzia).

The Ukrainian village of Bulaesti (Romanian: Bulăești) is located in the Orhei district of the Republic of Moldova. Large-scale interdisciplinary research on the Bulaestian Ukrainians has been conducted for almost twenty years, the results of which were summarized in a monograph published this year (Романчук 2024).

The Bulaestian Ukrainians are the bearers of a local Ukrainian dialect, but at the same time they are also part of an ethnocultural and ethnopolitical community of a higher level, a community called the “Russian-speaking population of the Republic of Moldova”.

“Russian-speaking population of the Republic of Moldova” actually means all ethnic minorities of the country, and first of all: Russians, Ukrainians, Bulgarians, Gagauz.

The very concept of “Russian-speaking Republics of Moldova” became widely used in scientific literature, perhaps, after the publication in 1998 of the monograph “Identity in Formation: the Russian-Speaking Populations in the Near Abroad” by the famous American political scientist and sociologist David Laitin (Laitin 1998) – the author of the international research project “National Processes, Language Relations and Identity”, which was implemented, among other things, in the Republic of Moldova (Остапенко et al. 2012: 9).

According to the annotation (the book itself, unfortunately, remained unavailable to me), in this monograph “Laitin concludes that the ‘Russian-speaking population’ is a new category of identity in the post-Soviet world. This conglomerate identity of those who share a language is analogous, Laitin suggests, to such designations as ‘Palestinian’ in the Middle East and ‘Hispanic’ in the United States” (Laitin 1998).

However, here it is more likely that D. Laitin introduced into scientific circulation a term that arose spontaneously and became quite widespread (at least

in the Republic of Moldova) in political journalism in the first half of the 1990s (if not in the late 1980s).

The logic of such a general concept as “Russian-speaking population of the Republic of Moldova” is quite clear. It is the Russian language, since the times of the Russian Empire and the USSR, that has served and continues to serve for all ethnic groups of the Republic of Moldova as a language of interethnic communication, and a language of education, and in some cases, for some representatives of the Ukrainians, Bulgarians or Gagauz, it even displaces their native language.

I will cite here some results of recent ethnosociological studies concerning the Gagauz. The Gagauz, including as speakers of a language that is particularly different from Russian (unlike the Ukrainian or Bulgarian ones), are especially noteworthy in this regard.

Thus, “the majority of Gagauz, including women, knew both the Gagauz and Russian languages well, and the use of Russian remains more widespread. According to a 2018 study, 74% of women and 77% of men had a good command of the Gagauz language (thought in the language and spoke it fluently), while 94% and 95%, respectively, spoke Russian <...>. The 2018 survey materials also indicate that both women and men use Russian more often during communication. Thus, 72% of women and 73% of men spoke it, and 51% and 49%, respectively, spoke Gagauz. When watching TV, the Russian language was used even more actively: 93% of women watched programs in Russian and only 25% in Gagauz, among men, respectively, 89% and 24% (including people who use both languages) <...>. More than a third of respondents (34% of men and 36% of women) would like their children to study in school in the Gagauz language. 83% of women and 77% of men, respectively, spoke in favor of Russian” (Субботина et al. 2021: 19).

While conducting (within the framework of the project “Russian-speaking population of the Republic of Moldova and the Romanian language”) field research in Comrat (December 13-22, 2024), I had the opportunity to see that the situation today has remained similar, despite the targeted policy of the Gagauz authorities in recent years to expand the use of the Gagauz language (a corresponding law with this name was even adopted). A significant part of the Gagauz respondents who took part in the survey (Gagauzia is a very multi-ethnic region (in addition to the Gagauz, Bulgarians should be especially singled out here), and representatives of all ethnic groups inhabiting it took part in the survey) indicated that, although both parents are Gagauz, in the

family they speak (or predominantly speak) Russian.

The reasons for this situation deserve special discussion, and, as it seems to me, it would be wrong to try to reduce them only to the policy of Russification in Soviet times. Without trying to give a detailed and exhaustive explanation here, I would like to draw attention primarily to two circumstances.

Firstly, to the fact that Comrat (where the Russification of the Gagauz is especially strong) was from the very beginning an extremely multi-ethnic city. And, accordingly, its residents, including the Gagauz, needed a certain *lingua franca* for mutual communication (some of the respondents drew attention to this circumstance). The Russian language became such a *lingua franca*.

Secondly (and this reason is also much more complex and requires a separate study), it seems that we can talk about the special plasticity of the Gagauz in ethno-linguistic processes, their high readiness (higher than that of other ethnic groups with which they are in the process of interaction) to adapt and perceive other languages (in this regard, the Gagauz, in my opinion, are very similar to the Romanian-speaking Moldovans). A good illustration is the situation to which G. N. Mutaf (Head of the Department of "Gagauz Philology" at Comrat State University) drew my attention during an in-depth interview, formulating its essence in a humorous (and, naturally, somewhat exaggerating the reality) phrase: "If a Bulgarian woman marries a Gagauz, then the entire family of this Gagauz immediately begins to learn Bulgarian" (interview from 13.12.2024, Comrat).

It seems that this is the very case when there is only a grain of a joke in a joke.

And, in confirmation, it can be noted that, indeed, among the participants of the survey there were several people from mixed Bulgarian-Gagauz families, and almost all of them indicated either Russian, or Bulgarian, or "Russian and Bulgarian" as the language in which communication takes place in the family.

That is, in interethnic Gagauz-Bulgarian marriages, and even (or perhaps even especially) in the case of a Gagauz man and a Bulgarian woman (and despite the machismo characteristic of the Gagauz culture and the generally high degree of authoritarianism of Gagauz men; as one of the respondents (Russian) reported, she would not want her daughter to marry a Gagauz precisely because of their authoritarianism in family relations), in most cases it is the Bulgarian language that becomes the language of communication of these emerging Gagauz-Bulgarian families. The picture, as it seems, is very in-

teresting and potentially very promising in scientific terms.

However, the observations presented here regarding Gagauz-Bulgarian interethnic interactions should be regarded only as purely preliminary and requiring verification on a significantly larger sample.

Returning to the main point, that is, to the Russian language and Russian-speaking people as a phenomenon, let us generalize: be that as it may, it is clear that today for the same Gagauz, the Russian language is more than just one of the languages they speak. Today, this is actually clearly felt well by the Gagauz themselves at the level of self-identification. As poet Petr Chebotar once remarked, the Gagauz identity reflects a mix of regional influences (Romanian, Turkish), yet is ultimately shaped by a deep affinity with Russian culture (Губоглю 2003: 6).

Even allowing for poetic exaggeration, this observation should still be recognized as reflecting reality. And, perhaps, with certain nuances, it will be true for other large (and even more so – small) ethnic minorities of the Republic of Moldova – Ukrainians and Bulgarians. With regard to the Ukrainians of the Republic of Moldova, the situation is also significantly influenced by the fact that Ukrainian villages here arose at different times, and as a result of migrations from different parts of the territory that only later became Ukraine. Accordingly, the population of at least some of these Ukrainian villages did not have a Ukrainian ethnic identity at all until the second half of the last century (like the same residents of Bulaesti – who were already registered as Ukrainians by the Soviet authorities) (Романчук 2024: 14-15). Today, the majority of Ukrainians in the Republic of Moldova do not identify themselves with Ukraine at all, even despite the fact that in recent decades Ukraine has been pursuing a targeted policy of, figuratively speaking, "Ukrainization of Ukrainians in the Republic of Moldova" through the opening of Ukrainian schools and various educational and cultural programs.

As for the Russians of the Republic of Moldova, it is significant that today they too are in fact the result of interethnic mixing and local cultural processes that have been going on for many decades. A good reflection of this fact is that "<...> of the total number of Russian young people surveyed in 1997, only a third came from homogeneous Russian families. The rest were representatives of families in which only one of the parents was Russian" (Остапенко et al. 2012: 137). A similar result was shown by a later ethnosociological study: "In 2003, three out of four marriages concluded by Russians were already interethnic" (Остапенко et al. 2012: 129).

It is also extremely significant (and I would like to especially emphasize this) that “in this republic (that is, in the Republic of Moldova. – A.R.) Russians more often entered into mixed marriages not with Moldovans, but with representatives of other nationalities, as a rule, with Ukrainians and Belarusians” (Остапенко et al. 2012: 129). Apparently, the like really does attract the like.

That is, the Russian-speaking population of the Republic of Moldova is united into a common whole not only by the Russian language.

Thus, as can be seen, the Russian-speaking population of the Republic of Moldova as a certain community, covering all ethnic minorities of the country, is not a scientific construct, but an objective ethnopolitical, ethnocultural and ethnolinguistic reality. I would like to emphasize that this is also an ethnopolitical reality. The political interests of the entire Russian-speaking population of the Republic of Moldova are quite close, and at their center is the preservation of friendly relations with Russia and the preservation of Moldovan statehood. As is well known (and no matter how paradoxical it may seem), the greatest champions of Moldovan independence and patriots of Moldovan statehood are precisely the Russian-speaking population of the Republic of Moldova. That is, the Russian-speaking population of the Republic of Moldova is an example of what, following A. Lijphart, is commonly called the “political segment” of specific societies. This is exactly how it was previously proposed to consider the Russian-speaking population of the Republic of Moldova (Романчук 2012: 18). And, apparently, for Gagauz it was precisely the fact that they were part of this larger political segment, which had a significantly higher economic, political, social and cultural potential, that became the sought-after (Воронович et al. 2009: 92), and a very significant factor that allowed them to achieve political autonomy.

Thus, Bulaestian Ukrainians are also part of this ethnopolitical, ethnocultural and ethnolinguistic reality. By the way, in the recent presidential elections, in the second round, they unanimously (more than 95%) voted for a candidate of Gagauz origin.

Today, all Bulaestian Ukrainians, besides their native dialect, speak Russian also, and it occupies a very significant (and, what is remarkable, still growing) niche in their sociolinguistic background. The main factor in the spread of the Russian language among Bulaestian Ukrainians was the Russian school, which has been functioning in Bulaesti since the middle of the last century. What is remarkable: although the Russian school has been functioning for more than 70 years, the prevalence of the Rus-

sian language, the degree of Russification of Bulaestian Ukrainians increased quite sharply, by leaps and bounds, already in the 1990s and especially in the 2000s. That is, after the collapse of the USSR and in the conditions of the existence of an independent state of the Republic of Moldova.

In other words, there is a significant time lag, actually four generations, between the moment of opening of a Russian school in the village and the moment of a sharp increase in Russification of the Bulaestian Ukrainians.

What is this time lag connected with? Is it not some kind of constant of ethno-linguistic interactions (not necessarily the indicated duration of four generations)? And why did the acceleration of Russification paradoxically occur in the period after the collapse of the USSR (that is, after the disappearance of that most powerful political factor that was the key driver of Russification)? Apparently, the answer to these questions has not only applied, but also significant theoretical significance. Without trying to give exhaustive answers to these questions here, I will draw attention to the following circumstances.

Firstly, we should probably talk about a kind of cumulative effect, when the inertia of the language process accumulated over a long period of time (several generations) leads to its sharp, abrupt acceleration. Apparently, this cumulative effect played a decisive role here. Therefore, secondly, it can be considered quite certain that the time lag in these processes is quite natural. Its specific duration should vary in each case, and depends, in turn, on specific conditions. But, if we talk specifically about the Bulaesti Ukrainians, then the decisive circumstance here, apparently, was the fact that by the end of the 1990s – beginning of the 2000s, those generations that did not study in Russian schools had almost completely passed away. Accordingly, with their departure, the Bulaestian society lost a very powerful “anchor” that had previously restrained its Russification. Thirdly, it was in the 1990s and beyond that the volume of television content available to villagers increased sharply (films, cartoons, entertainment programs). People (especially young children) began to spend much more time in front of the television. And all this content was in Russian. Later, around 2010, the “TV factor” was organically supplemented (and is still increasing) by the Internet factor. Where, again, the overwhelming majority (if not all) of the content (already truly limitless) consumed by Bulaestian Ukrainians is presented in Russian.

Fourthly, it was in the 1990s, due to the impossibility of earning a living in the village and in the country in general, that the residents of Bulaesti (as

well as other villages in the Republic of Moldova) were forced to resort in masse to labor migration and look for work in the outside world. The main “promised country” in this era and up until the 2010s was precisely Russia, where people went to work for six months or even a year. As a result, many settled in Russia, received citizenship, and the further they go, the less often they come home.

Perhaps, in addition to the above factors, other factors played a significant role. But, be that as it may, we state once again: already by the beginning of the 90s of the last centuries, all Bulaestian Ukrainians were bilingual, and during the 90s, Russification even increased: in some families, even parents with children spoke Russian.

Nevertheless, during the 2000s (and especially after 2010), the role of the Romanian language also increased. And at present, in Bulaesti, those who are younger than 40, and especially 30 years old, as a rule, can either communicate in Romanian at least at the most primitive level, or, in extreme cases, understand Romanian speech. That is, to one degree or another, trilingual (Romanchuk 2024).

The main factors in the growth of knowledge of Romanian were work in a Romanian-speaking environment (again), including in Romania (as well as in Europe; in order to work in Europe, many try to obtain Romanian citizenship). And, paradoxically, even in Russia: some respondents indicated that they learned Romanian while working on construction sites in St. Petersburg and Moscow, since their workmates were mostly Moldovans.

It is also worth noting the increase in the number of interethnic marriages.

And, according to the estimates of young respondents (including school-age), a significant role was also played by the noticeable improvement in teaching Romanian in rural schools (in recent years). Finally, obviously, an extremely significant factor was the pressure from the state and the Romanian-speaking environment as a whole. That is, the unwillingness of some part of the Romanian-speaking population and especially government officials to speak Russian.

This factor is noted by all respondents in Bulaesti and is assessed, I note, very negatively. To the point that to the question: “What prevents better knowledge and use of the Romanian language?” all respondents, in one way or another, named as the most important reason the fact that they often encountered a demonstrative reluctance to speak Russian with them (primarily on the part of officials).

The fact that the Bulaestian Ukrainians have significantly improved their knowledge of the Roma-

nian language today, greatly increasing their ability to socially and economically adapt in the country, should certainly be assessed as a very positive phenomenon (even despite the above-mentioned costs due to the use of coercion of Russian-speakers by the state (especially) to master the Romanian language).

But it should also be noted (and this is a very important fact) that despite the noted increase in knowledge of the Romanian language among the Bulaestian Ukrainians, in general, however, their involvement in Romanian culture has practically not increased. Nobody in the village watches movies or TV channels, reads books or media in Romanian.

To what extent Bulaesti reflects the Russian-speaking population of the Republic of Moldova as a whole requires special research. However, I must note that the study I conducted in Comrat from December 13-22, 2024, although still small in terms of sample size, demonstrated a similar trend. The vast majority (almost 100% of respondents) of the surveyed students of Comrat University (that is, mainly young people under 23) do not watch films and programs in Romanian, nor do they use it in communication on social networks.

Thus, this question (and even more so, the answer to it) is obviously extremely important.

Because, if this is true, it turns out that the Russian-speaking and Romanian-speaking populations of the Republic of Moldova, formally communicating quite closely, are increasingly diverging into “parallel worlds” at a deeper level. This is aggravated by the fact that an increasing part of the Romanian-speaking youth of the country knows Russian poorly or does not know it at all.

In this regard, I would like to dwell here on a curious fact (going beyond the Bulaesti topic itself), which was reported by one of the respondents, Karina Z., a native of the village and now also living in Bulaesti, but in the recent past a student at the financial college in Chisinau (she graduated about ten years ago). According to her, from her Russian-speaking group (30 girls) at the college not a single girl married a Romanian-speaking guy.

This example is, of course, statistically insignificant, and insufficient for broad generalizations. But it is also certainly extremely curious. To adequately assess it, we should give a short excursion into the history of the situation with interethnic marriages in Moldova.

Thus, “according to the censuses of 1959, 1970 and 1979, Moldova occupied one of the first places in the USSR in terms of the share of nationally mixed families, second in this respect only to Latvia, Ukraine and Kazakhstan. From census to census

this figure increased: from 13.5% in 1959 to 21.0% in 1979” (Остапенко et al. 2012: 127). Moreover, “the cities of Moldova surpassed the cities of all other republics in this indicator: the share of nationally mixed families in the urban population increased from 26.9% to 36.0% over the period 1959–1979, i.e. every third family in the cities of Moldova was nationally mixed” (Остапенко et al. 2012: 127).

However, “by the beginning of the 21st century, the ethnic picture of marriages in Moldova had changed very significantly. The titular ethnic group of the republic, as well as the Gagauz, clearly showed a tendency towards an increase in the share of mono-ethnic marriages, while Russians and other nationalities of Moldova showed a significant increase in the share of inter-ethnic marriages” (Остапенко et al. 2012: 133). And, “In the republic as a whole, the share of mixed-ethnic marriages among all marriages concluded during the year has consistently decreased: from 32% in 1970 to 22% in 2003” (Остапенко et al. 2012: 129).

Taking into account the data of these same researchers cited at the beginning of the article that Russians in the Republic of Moldova marry predominantly with representatives of other ethnic minorities, the picture is truly remarkable. True, at the same time, the cited researchers also provide information that somewhat contradicts their conclusion voiced above: “The share of marriages with representatives of the titular nationality has increased for all national groups in Moldova, except for the Gagauz. Thus, among Russians, the share of marriages concluded with Moldovans has increased almost twofold: from 21% for women and 25% for men in 1970 to 42-43% in 2003” (Остапенко et al. 2012: 133-134).

Here, however, an important question that urgently requires clarification is whether we are talking about Romanian-speaking Moldovans or Russian-speaking ones? And, no less importantly: what language is ultimately spoken in these emerging families, Russian or Romanian?

The fact is that Russian-speaking Moldovans are a fairly noticeable group in the country’s population. Based on the Bulaesti data, I can say that the majority of children living in Chisinau, born as a result of marriages between Bulaestian Ukrainians and Moldovans, are either Russian-speaking Moldovans or Russian-speaking Ukrainians. That is, according to their passports they are Moldovans or Ukrainians (and this is how they designate themselves in censuses), and they may even speak Romanian (often designating it as Moldovan). But the language of communication both in the families of their parents and in their own families is Russian.

I would like also to note here that, based on the results of my research in Comrat from December 13-22, 2024, which I have already mentioned, a small group of respondents identified themselves as Moldovans (and some of them even have both Moldovan parents), but the language of communication in their families is Russian (or one of the languages of communication). They speak Romanian (though most of them identified it as Moldavian language), but, in fact, they are also Russian-speaking Moldovans. The sample of the research in this regard is, of course, very small so far, but the results already obtained are very interesting and require further clarification.

Thus, accordingly, it cannot be ruled out that the above data of the researchers on the growth of marriages between Russians and Moldovans actually reflects the growth of marriages within the Russian-speaking segment of Moldovan society. Actually, such an assumption is in better agreement with their conclusion, cited above, that “the titular ethnic group of the republic, as well as the Gagauz, clearly showed a tendency to increase the share of mono-ethnic marriages” (Остапенко et al. 2012: 133).

However, for now this should be left at the level of assumption, bearing in mind the need for further clarification and clarification of this issue.

For now, and to sum up: it seems that the results of the study of Bulaestian Ukrainians, as part of the Russian-speaking segment of Moldovan society, presented in the article, are quite interesting. And they allow us to outline a number of important questions that are significant for Moldovan society as a whole, and specifically from the point of view of preserving the *lingua comuna* by Moldovan society. I hope that the continuation of this study and the further expansion of its source base will allow us to obtain answers to the questions posed here.

Note

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